

Puppets of Terror: The Limits and Opportunities of Creating Ambiguity about Terrorists and Terrorism through Humor

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At times of war, the rhetorical strategy of framing an opponent as a dispensible “other” and dehumanizing the enemy enables people to view other human beings as worthy of death. Since 9/11, the labels of “terror” and “terrorist” have served these rhetorical ends. This analysis explores the ways that puppetry and rhetorical strategies of humor have been used since the 9/11 attacks to create ambiguity around the concepts of terrorists and terrorism. Comedians, with the help of a small army of complex, ambivalent characters, have problematized the politics of fear and dehumanization. This research examined puppets from three sources: the satirical news program *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*; the marionette movie *Team America*; and ventriloquist Jeff Dunham. The research draws on scholarship about the purpose and social functions of humor. Through the lens of rhetorical criticism and cultural studies, I analyzed the persona constructed by the puppets and the implications of their messages about terrorism, terrorists, and domestic policy. I suggest that the humorous use of puppets constructs a neutered terrorist threat, breaks down rigid perception barriers, and challenges visceral reactions to the words “terrorist” and “terror.” These performances also call into question the rigid and binary distinctions between good and evil that the politics of fear construct. However, even as they create ambiguity, these comic figures provide subtle strategies to deride the enemy, vent anger, and reinforce stereotypes about the threat of the “Other.” For better or worse, the use of not-quite human representatives of terror allowed America to laugh again after 9/11. Understanding the role of humor as it relates to fear, particularly regarding the sensitive and often racially charged discussion of radical Islamic fundamentalists, contributes to a refined perspective of the role of humor as a political tool.

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